CHAPTER 9
FROM THE ZOHAR TO SAFED

I

The two centuries which separate the appearance of the Zohar in Spain and the establishment of the new center of the kabbalah in sixteenth-century Safed witnessed a period of intensive kabbalistic creativity, the spread of the kabbalah to Italy and Germany, the resolution of the conflict between the followers of the kabbalah and those of Jewish philosophy in favor of the mystics, and the strengthening of the kabbalah in Jewish culture. During these two centuries dozens of kabbalistic works were written, old ideas were developed and expounded, and new ones emerged, all to shape the future of Jewish mystical literature.

Scholem dedicated a significant part of his scholarly activity to the investigation of the kabbalah in this period. He wrote many papers on specific kabbalistic works of the sixteenth century on.1

Scholem studied the kabbalah of this period to identify specific mystical works, their authors, their date, and their
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background. He analyzed their mutual relationship and interdependence and characterized the original theological contribution of each.

Some examples of his work in this field are the identification of Rabbi Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi as the author of the important commentary on *Sefer Yezirah* which had been wrongly attributed to Rabbi Abraham ben David (the Ravad); the description of his other kabbalistic work (a commentary on the Midrash on Genesis) and his analysis of his theories; his identification and discussion of the works of Rabbi David ben Judah he-Hasid, one of the most important followers of the Zohar; his identification of the works of Rabbi Shem Tob ibn Gaon and of Rabbi Isaac of Acre, and many others.

All these studies were based on material found almost exclusively in manuscripts. In most cases Scholem was the first to discover and read them.

II

During the fourteenth century, the kabbalah developed along two different lines. First, the growing impact of the Zohar led to the appearance of Hebrew mystical works relying on it, imitating it, and developing its symbolism. Second, the work of the pre-Zoharic schools of the kabbalah, especially that of Gerona, continued almost uninfluenced by the Zohar. During most of the fourteenth century the second trend was still dominant. The most important followers of the Zohar in this period were the anonymous author of the *Ra'aya Mehib-
emna and the Tikuney ha-Zohar, whose works, written at the very end of the thirteenth century and the beginning of the fourteenth, were included in the Zohar itself, and Rabbi David ben Judah he-Hasid, who was a descendant of Nachmanides, whose works include lengthy translations from the Zohar into Hebrew, which were then presented as new kabbalistic works. It is interesting to note that in the fourteenth century it seems that the Zohar was more important to the kabbalah when it spread to new countries and became the basis for new centers than it was for the kabbalists in Spain itself, who continued to a very large extent the traditions of their various pre-Zoharic schools. Thus, when the kabbalah spread to Italy in the beginning of the fourteenth century, the most important spokesman for the Zohar was Rabbi Menachem Recanati. He wrote two major works, one a commentary on the Torah and the other an interpretation of the reasons for the commandments (ta'amey ha-mitsvot). Both were based on the Zohar and strewn with quotations from that book, which are very important for the establishment of the original text of the Zohar. Similarly, one of the most important kabbalists in Germany, Rabbi Menachem Ziyuni, wrote a commentary on the Torah and an interesting work on mystical demonology. He also used the Zohar extensively and combined Zoharic quotations with the teachings of the Ashkenazi Hasidic masters, especially Rabbi Eleazar of Worms. The importance of the Zohar in the works of the most prominent mystics in the new, emerging circles of kabbalists in these countries enhanced significantly its spread and influence.

Most kabbalists in Spain, however, should be viewed as continuing the previous schools of the kabbalah. The most
important center in Spain at the end of the thirteenth century and the beginning of the fourteenth was the one Scholem called "the Rashba circle," after the name of its most important leader, Rabbi Solomon ben Abraham Adret, known by the acronym the Rashba. Rabbi Solomon was a great halachist and one of the greatest leaders of Spanish Jewry. He did not write any kabbalistic work, though his commentary on the aggadot of the Talmud includes several references to kabbalistic symbols. The Rashba was regarded by the kabbalists of that period as their leader, as was Nachmanides in the middle of the thirteenth century. Among his disciples in kabbalah were Rabbi Isaac ben Todros, Rabbi Bahya ben Asher of Saragossa, and Rabbi Shem Tob ben Abraham ibn Gaon. A scholar from Eretz Israel seems to have joined this group named Rabbi Isaac of Acre.

Rabbi Bahya ben Asher was one of the first kabbalists to use the Zohar, but he did not quote it overtly because his works were intended for the wide public. Another kabbalist, Rabbi Joshua ibn Shueib, later followed a similar path. Both were following the Gerona tradition of Rabbi Jacob ben Sheshet and others, to write popular, ethical, and homiletical works, in which kabbalistic symbolism and theology play a hidden, subdued role. The prestige of the kabbalah grew because of its inclusion in popular culture.

Rabbi Shem Tob ibn Gaon was a halachist, who wrote an important commentary on Maimonides' legal code. He came from Soria, and was familiar with the traditions of Rabbi Jacob and Rabbi Isaac, the Cohen brothers. When he was in Spain he wrote a treatise entitled Keter Shem Tov on the subject that most interested the kabbalists of the Rashba circle—
Nachmanides' "secrets," that is, the kabbalistic references in his commentary on the Torah. Shem Tob ibn Gaon emigrated to Jerusalem in 1315. There he wrote a completely different kind of kabbalistic work, *Badey ha-Aron*, in memory of his friend Rabbi Elhanan, who had died there. He completed the work in Safed in 1325. This work reflects the influence of the Cohen brothers, and includes pseudepigraphic parts. It also includes whole sections from the *Zohar*, copied verbatim, without any clear indication of the source from which they were taken. It seems that for Rabbi Shem Tob the teachings of the *Zohar* were important, but the book itself was suspect, and its name better left unmentioned.

The school of the Rashba continued the traditions of the kabbalists of Gerona in another respect. The Rashba took an important part in the renewed controversy concerning the study of philosophy, in 1305. Like Nachmanides in the previous century, the Rashba personally opposed the free study of rationalistic philosophy, but as a leader he assumed a moderate, conciliatory position. In the subsequent years the attitude of the kabbalists became more and more divided over formal philosophy. On the one hand, an attempt was made to merge kabbalah and philosophy and present them as if they were two aspects of the same truth. Each would contribute its own viewpoint and terminology to the understanding of the philosophical questions. One of the most important kabbalists to follow this path was Rabbi Joseph ibn Waqar. To some extent, he followed the tradition of Rabbi Isaac ibn Latif, who had been active in the previous century. Ibn Waqar believed that a synthesis between the kabbalah and philosophy was possible, and it seems that some philosophers, from
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Rabbi Moses Narboni\(^{21}\) to Rabbi Hasdai Crescas\(^{22}\) seem to have shared this view. By the fifteenth century, however, this movement was supported only by a few Jewish intellectuals.

On the other hand, the kabbalists wrote more works which vehemently opposed formal philosophy and all its influences. The best known among these was Rabbi Shem Tov ben Shem Tov, whose *Sefer ha-Emunot* (*The Book of Beliefs*), which includes many early kabbalistic traditions and quotations, represents a direct attack against Jewish philosophy.\(^{23}\) During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Maimonides was claimed as a kabbalist.\(^{24}\) The name of Maimonides was too exalted and his prestige too great to be left to the philosophers; the Jewish mystics had to adopt him as one of their own and reinterpret his philosophy as a special genre of kabbalistic symbolism.

III

The fifteenth-century kabbalistic works which exerted the greatest influence on subsequent developments in Jewish mysticism were probably two books written by the same unknown author: *Sefer ha-Peliah* and *Sefer ha-Kanah* (*The Book of (Esoteric) Wonder* and *The Book of (Rabbi Nehunia ben) ha-Kanah*)\(^{25}\) The first is a collection of various kabbalistic traditions from earlier sources, with great emphasis on mythological symbolism and an interest in the details of the process of redemption. The second is a commentary on the reasons for the commandments (*ta'amey ha-mitsvot*), but in a peculiar literary manner: The author of the *Sefer ha-Kanah* invented a
family, which was described as connected with Rabbi Nehunia ben ha-Kanah, who was regarded as the author of the book *Bahir*. The book includes several imaginative stories of supernatural revelations which had some influence on subsequent Hebrew mystical storytelling. There is little doubt that the author of this work tried to imitate the *Zohar* in a creative manner. Instead of following the Zoharic language and the stories about the circle of Rabbi Shimeon bar Yohai, he created an imaginary family of ancient mystics, and revealed his own mystical ideas through their Hebrew homilies. These works were probably written in Greece and had great influence on later kabbalists up to the Hasidic movement of the eighteenth century.

Scholem emphasized in his description of this period the renewed strengthening of the magical element in kabbalistic works. One school of kabbalists produced works which combined theosophic speculation with studies of secret divine names, the meaning of the Hebrew alphabet in the tradition of Abraham Abulafia, and clear magical formulas. The best-known work among these is the *Brit ha-Menuha*, published in 1648, which is a manifestation of a trend that grew considerably in the sixteenth century both in Safed and in Europe. It seems that although the works of Abulafia were superseded in the history of the kabbalah by the followers of the theosophical school and especially the *Zobar*, they still had an impact. Kabbalists generations later, without any direct line of tradition to connect them with the teachings of the "prophetic kabbalist" of the thirteenth century, found inspiration and great insight in them.

The kabbalah became almost a popular subject when the fifteenth century was drawing to a close. This is attested to,
for instance, by the fact that one of the most popular Hebrew ethical works of the Middle Ages was Rabbi Israel Alnaqa-
wa's *Menorat ha-Maor*. This is based almost exclusively on quotations and paraphrases of Talmudic and Midrashic sources; it also contains quotations from the *Zohar* (as the Midrash *Yehi Or, Let There Be Light*).\(^{31}\) In the early sixteenth century we find popular homilists quoting the *Zohar* freely, integrating the kabbalah completely into popular culture, and negat-
ing the admonishments of Rabbi Isaac the Blind in his letter to Gerona three centuries earlier.\(^{32}\) Mysticism did not be-
come popular in the full sense of the term, however, until the seventeenth century, under the impact of the Lurianic kabbalah from Safed, but it could not be described as appeal-
ing only to mystics. Many of the best-known and most frequently read commentaries on the Bible and collections of sermons which constituted, together with books on ethics, the popular culture of the age, were written by kabbalists and influenced, at least to some extent, by kabbalistic sym-
bolism. If the kabbalah was not yet popular, it certainly be-
came familiar. Its prestige was on the rise and, coupled with the rapid decline of Jewish philosophy in the fifteenth cen-
tury, its position more and more central in Jewish thought.

While the kabbalah was becoming known to some extent in most Jewish communities, it was most deeply accepted and understood in Italy. Jewish intellectuals in Italy during the Renaissance period, deeply influenced by the strong neo-
Platonic attitudes of their Christian neighbors, discovered similar attitudes in the kabbalah. Their increasing interest in Jewish mystical sources also reached non-Jewish intellectuals, to create the Christian kabbalah.

The problem of the emergence of the Christian kabbalah,
and especially its roots within Judaism, fascinated Schlem throughout his scholarly career, for several reasons. Here he had an opportunity to study the Jewish symbols when they were transformed into another language, another religion, and another mystical tradition; he could also follow the intrinsic force of the Jewish mystical ideas when they operated in a different culture. Another intriguing aspect was that between the Christian kabbalists and the Jewish sources there was an intervening group of people—the translators from Hebrew to Latin, who were mostly converted Jews. Schlem was particularly interested in those Jewish converts to Christianity who wrote books explaining their adherence to the new religion; he even collected a special library of their works, which he defined as "anti-Semitic books written by converts." The Jews who translated kabbalistic works to Latin to serve the religious purposes of Christian theologians and mystics fascinated him. Indeed, the appearance of the kabbalah in Latin preceded the Renaissance period by several centuries, and Schlem investigated those early beginnings.33

The most important kabbalist in the late fifteenth century in Italy who was deeply influenced by the Platonism of the Florentine school was Rabbi Johanan Alemano, who was a prolific writer.34 One of his disciples, Samuel Abulfaraj, converted to Christianity and assumed the name of Flavius Mithridates. This convert wrote some sermons, one of which was delivered in front of the Pope. He suggested that Christianity could be defended against Judaism by resorting to secret Jewish works, though the material he presented was from the usual rabbinic sources.35 But his life work was the translation of kabbalistic works into Latin, which he did systematically
and diligently, including works of Rabbi Judah the Pious and of Abraham Abulafia. He presented them to the prodigy of that period in Christian theology—the Count Pico della Mirandola.

Pico himself studied Hebrew, and was interested in the kabbalah together with all ancient traditions, whether magical, orphic, or anything else. In his theses he proposed to prove the veracity and antiquity of Christian truth from the kabbalah. Among his 900 theses, about 130 are based on his studies of the kabbalah. Pico, like other Christian kabbalists, completely accepted the claim of the Jewish mystics that their works reflected traditions given to Moses and to the Patriarchs and transmitted orally from generation to generation.

Pico and other Christian kabbalists, especially Johannes Reuchlin, who wrote two major books on the kabbalah, also believed that by studying these sources they could discover prerabbinic truths, obscured in the Hebrew rabbinic sources, that would reflect basic Christian theology. Reuchlin was especially interested in the doctrine of the secret names of God, and presented a system according to which the true name of God was revealed only through the appearance of Christianity. In fact, Jesus' name is the full name of God, hidden from the Jews and revealed to his followers when Christianity appeared.

The Christian kabbalists spread some of the kabbalistic myths and symbols to the fertile ground of Europe during the Renaissance period. These symbols, though drastically transformed in their new cultural environment, flourished and enriched not only European thought but its literature as well.36

By the beginning of the sixteenth century, therefore, the
kabbalah spread to geographical and cultural realms far beyond the original closed circles from which it had emerged three centuries earlier. The influence of rationalistic philosophy was weakening, and after the expulsion from Spain it almost disappeared. Some kabbalistic works began to be accepted throughout the Jewish intellectual world. Among these was the anonymous systematization of the kabbalah, *Sefer Ma’arechet ha-Elohut* (*The Book of the Divine Hierarchy*), to which Rabbi Judah Hayyat wrote a commentary. It served as a textbook for the study of the kabbalah. Another example is a work by Rabbi Meir ibn Gabbay, entitled *Avodat ha-Kodesh* (*Holy Worship*), which presented in a coherent, systematic form the mystical meaning of Jewish ritual, especially that of the prayers, to give a mystical dimension to everyday religious rituals.

It seemed as if the kabbalah had matured into an aspect of Jewish culture. However, the expulsion of the Jews from Spain presented Judaism with new theological problems. Only the kabbalah had the answers to these problems, and thus, in the new kabbalistic center in Safed the kabbalah was transformed from a minor aspect of Jewish culture into a dynamic force helping to shape Jewish history.

**Notes**

3. See Moshe Hallamish, “The Beginning of Rabbi Joseph Ashkenazi’s
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7. For R. David's most important work, see The Book of Mirrors: Sefer Mar'ot ha-Zove'ot by R. David ben Yehudah be-Hasid, edited by Daniel Matt (Chico, Cal.: Scholars Press, 1982).

8. On Recanati's works, see G. Scholem, Kabballah, p. 62.

9. Menahem Ziyuni's "Commentary on the Torah" was one of the early works of kabbalah to be printed, while his work on demonology, Zefunei Ziyuni, is extant in two manuscripts in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.


11. See Ephraim Gottlieb, Studies in the Kabballa Literature, edited by Joseph Hacker (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1976), p. 570, and passim.

12. For a detailed study of this kabbalist, see E. Gottlieb, Ha-Qabbalah be-Khitvei Rabbenu Bahya ben 'Asher (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1970).

13. For an extensive discussion of Bahya's use of the Zohar, see E. Gottlieb, Ha-Qabbalah be-Khitvei Rabbenu Bahya ben 'Asher, pp. 167–93.


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15. The halakic and kabbalistic writings of Shem Tob ibn Ga'on were described by S. D. Levinger in his study "Rabbi Shem Tob ben Abraham ben Ga'on" (Hebrew), Sefunot, 7 (1963), pp. 9–39. The paper was reprinted as an introduction to the facsimile edition of Shem Tob ibn Gaon's Baddei Ha-3Aron u-Migdal Hananel, based on MS. 840 in the National Library, Paris (Jerusalem: Orient and Occident, 1977).


18. The controversy has not yet received full scholarly treatment and the exact role of the Rashba's circle in it has not been clarified.


24. For a study of the legend of Maimonides' transformation from philosopher to kabbalist, see G. Scholem, "Me-Hoqer le-Mequbal," Tarbiẓ, 6 (1939), pp. 334–42.

25. Both books were printed in Koretz, which later became the center of Hasidic printing.
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28. For a detailed study of these two works, see Michal Oron, "The Sefer ha-Peli'ah and the Sefer ha-Kanah: Their Kabbalistic Principles, Social and Religious Criticism and Literary Composition" (Ph.D. thesis, Hebrew University, 1980).

29. The identification of Greece or areas under Greek or Byzantine influence as the place of origin of these works is based on the versions of the prayers included in them. See I. Ta-Shema, "Hekhan Nithaber Sefer Alilot Devarim?" Alei Sefer, 3 (1937), pp. 44–53; M. Oron, "The Sefer ha-Peli'ah and the Sefer ha-Kanah," pp. 6–15.


32. See above, ch. 6, p. 173, n. 37.

33. See the bibliography on this subject compiled by Scholem in Kabbalah, pp. 209–10.


37. Scholem did not devote specific studies to the kabbalah in eastern countries. It is today being studied by scholars such as M. Hallamish, M. Idel, Z. Gries, D. Maor, and others. See, for example, M. Hallamish, Le-Toldot ha-Kabbalah be Teman (The History of Kabbalah in Yeman) (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1984).